

Wisconsin school choice debate turns on the numbers

By [Erin Richards](#) of the Journal Sentinel
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Depending on your perspective, approximately 3,000 students who applied for taxpayer-funded vouchers to attend private schools across the state this fall means one of two things:

1. There's great demand for the new statewide voucher program launched last year. The enrollment cap of 1,000 seats for students this fall should be lifted.
2. There's little demand for the program, and most of it is from kids already attending private schools. If the program has to exist at all, the enrollment cap should stay put.

[Last week's release](#) of the statewide voucher program application numbers for the 2014-'15 school year has prompted parties in different camps to use the same data — or different parts of the same data — to support their positions.

The hardening of battle lines portends the key role that vouchers, broadly known as school choice, will play in this fall's elections and the next legislative session. A proposal to expand the statewide program is expected to be introduced in the governor's budget bill or in separate legislation.

"It is turning out to be the No. 1 or No. 2 campaign issue — maybe No. 2 behind jobs," said Matt Kussow, executive director of the [Wisconsin Council of Religious and Independent Schools](#). "No matter who's in office, they're going to be talking about expanding vouchers."

The statewide voucher program, formally known as the [Wisconsin Parental Choice Program](#), is capped at 1,000 students for the 2014-'15 school year, up from 500 allowed in the program in its inaugural 2013-'14 academic year.

The statewide program is similar to the [Racine Parental Choice Program](#), launched in fall 2011, and the longstanding [Milwaukee Parental Choice Program](#), started in 1990.

The programs, which allow low- and moderate-income students to attend private, mostly religious schools at taxpayer expense, were all created and/or expanded under the GOP-led Legislature since Gov. Scott Walker took office.

What the numbers say

A total of 3,407 students applied to 68 private schools that registered to try to receive tuition vouchers in the fall of 2014, according to [state data](#) released last week.

Not all those students met the income requirements.

To participate, students have to be from families earning no more than 185% of the federal poverty level, or no more than \$44,122 for a family of four.

Among just the new, income-eligible students who applied to a private school trying to get into the statewide program this fall, 71% of applicants were from private schools, and about 22% were from public schools.

Only 31 private schools will be allowed to accept students on vouchers this fall. Those were the schools that collected the highest number of student applications, plus five that are continuing with seats from this current school year who did not attract many new applications but get to continue serving students that started in the first year of the program on a voucher.

That leaves 2,834 eligible student applicants in 31 eligible schools, including the 482 students currently receiving vouchers statewide who reapplied to continue in the program this fall.

From the first year to the second year of the program, demand for the program increased faster from families in private schools than in public schools.

Whether or not they met the income requirement, 633 public-school students applied for a voucher to attend a private school this fall, compared with 555 public-school students who applied last year. That's an increase of 14%.

A total of 2,072 students in private schools applied for a voucher this fall, up from 1,666 private-school student applicants last year, for a year-to-year increase of 24%.

What the numbers mean

Supporters say the numbers indicate demand.

[State Sen. Leah Vukmir](#) (R-Wauwatosa) last week called for raising or removing the enrollment cap on the statewide voucher program in the coming legislative session.

"Since its inception, school choice in Wisconsin has been a winner for Wisconsin families, students and taxpayers," she said in a statement.

But research on the effects of the voucher program in Milwaukee shows that most children attending voucher schools perform no better academically than their peers in public schools.

The original goal of Milwaukee's voucher program, created in 1990, was to improve achievement, but the narrative has changed in recent years. Now supporters say it's important for parents to have the choice to send their child to whatever school they think is best for their child.

[State Sen. Luther Olsen](#) (R-Ripon), chair of the Senate Education Committee, looks at the program differently than Vukmir. He said it's not about kids on the outside looking in to private schools; it's about kids on the inside looking out for a check.

"The question is, what is this purpose of this program? Is it a program to help poor kids get out of public schools, or is it a program to pay for the tuition of kids who are already in private schools?" Olsen said. "It's pretty obvious from the last two go-rounds (of applications) that it's the latter."

Olsen said the Legislature and governor will have to decide if the program is going to be a new entitlement program, and if so, how the state would pay for every child in a private school.

Deacon Ray DuBois, president of the [ACES Xavier Educational System](#), a preschool through 12th grade

Catholic school system in Appleton, said it was important to distinguish the statewide program from the Milwaukee voucher program.

"The basis for the Milwaukee program was getting kids out of failing schools," DuBois said. "The statewide program is pure and simple parental choice."

ACES Xavier enrolls about 1,600 students, 53 of whom currently receive a voucher. The Catholic system received the highest number of voucher applications statewide for next fall: 191.

DuBois said about 54% of their new applications came from students not currently in their system.

The system will receive at least an additional 10 seats in the 2014-'15 school year, and potentially more, depending on how the state's random assignment of seats works out.

Terry Brown, vice president of voucher-advocacy group [School Choice Wisconsin](#), said there's a "natural suppression" in the number of overall applications because many parents and private schools didn't want to roll the dice on applying to participate with so few seats available under the enrollment cap.

He said a larger number of applications came from students in private schools because private-school students are going to be the first to hear about the voucher-program expansion.

"The average parent who isn't already in the (private) school is saying, 'What are my chances?' Brown said. "If you're already at the private school, you fill out the paperwork already."

Starting this fall, each student on a voucher will bring a private K-8 school participating in the program an annual payment of up to \$7,210. The maximum annual per-pupil voucher payment for participating private high schools will be \$7,865.

Publicly subsidizing hundreds of children already in private schools perplexes critics.

In their view, expanding voucher programs siphons off public funding that could otherwise be used to support public schools.

"It couldn't possibly be that the goal for the program was to pay for students already in private schools to go to private schools," [Rep. Gordon Hintz](#) (D-Oshkosh) said.

Two private schools from Hintz's area, Valley Christian School and Lourdes Academy, are in the top 25 private schools that received the most applications from potential students for next year, and they will receive seats.

Hintz said both the schools are fine schools, but he doesn't believe that taxpayer dollars should pay for students already enrolled there.

Joanne Juhnke, policy director for [Wisconsin Family Ties](#), a nonprofit that advocates for families with children who have mental disabilities, questioned what exactly constitutes demand for the program.

She said the number of applicants was strikingly low, especially from public school students, considering that the private schools and their advocacy organizations had a full year to recruit for the new statewide program.

To get the word out, School Choice Wisconsin funded automated phone calls to parents earlier this year, informing them that their children might be eligible for a free, private-school education.

The demand from private-school families was not a surprise, Juhnke said.

"Who wouldn't like someone else to fund what you're already paying for?" she said.

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<http://www.jsonline.com/news/education/wisconsin-school-choice-debate-turns-on-the-numbers-b99276610z1-260832971.html>

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